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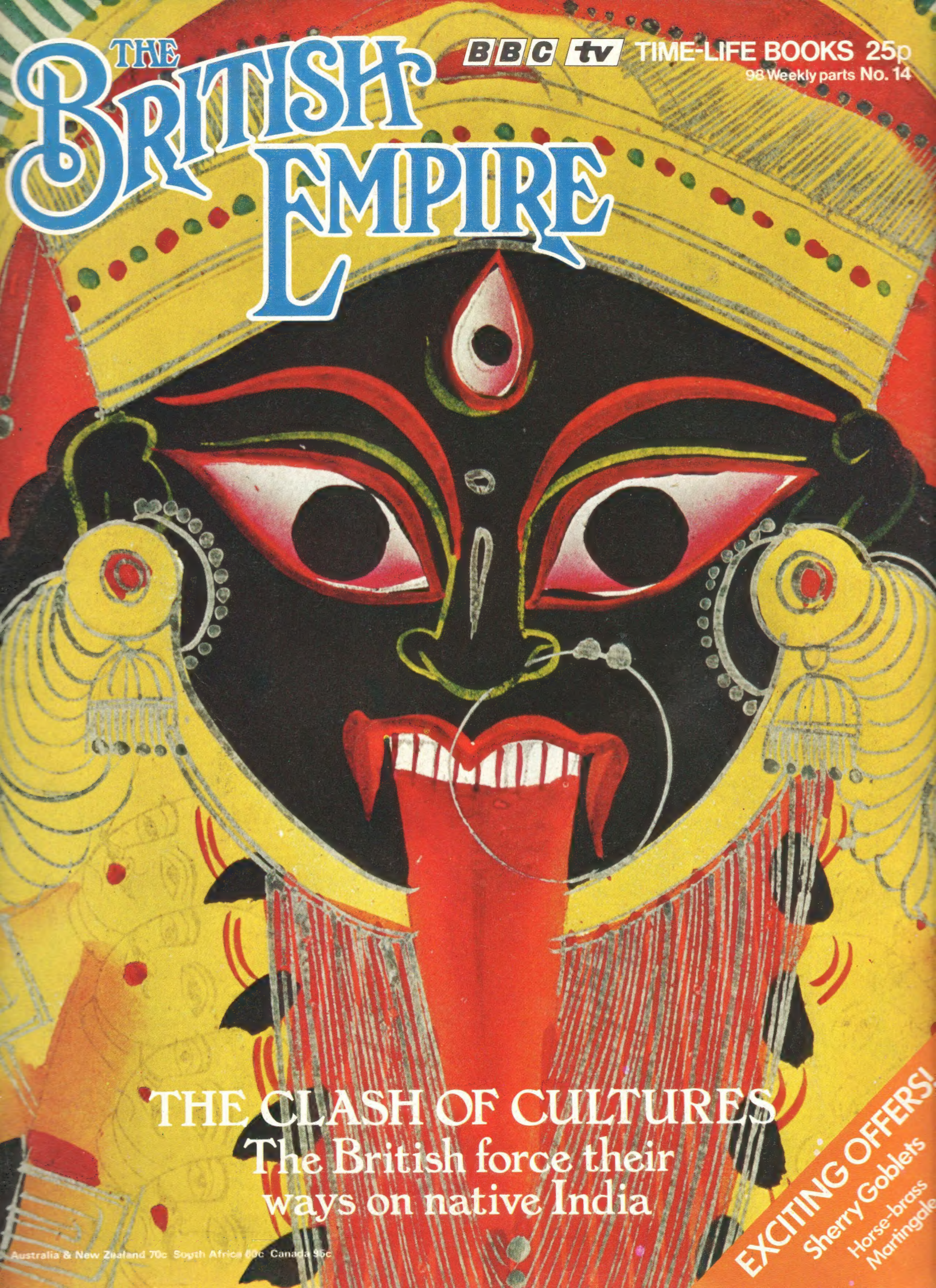

THE CLASH OF CULTURES
The British force their ways on native India

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Published by Time-Life/BBC.
Printed in England by Jarrold and Sons Ltd. Norwich.

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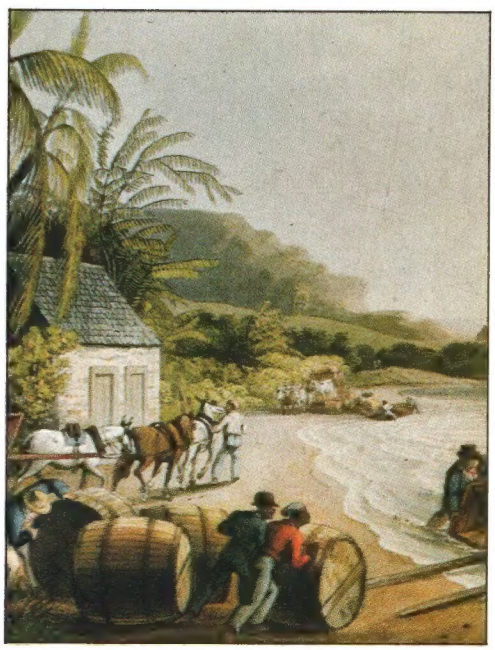

Issue No. 16: Pirates and Planters. For 150 years, the West Indian isles were bases for piracy, pawns in Europe's power struggles – and the source of fortunes won from the area's slave-based sugar plantations.

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Cover: The hideous Hindu goddess Kali represented, for reformist British, the worst aspects of Indian society: she was worshipped by the Thugs, who undertook their ritual murders in her name.

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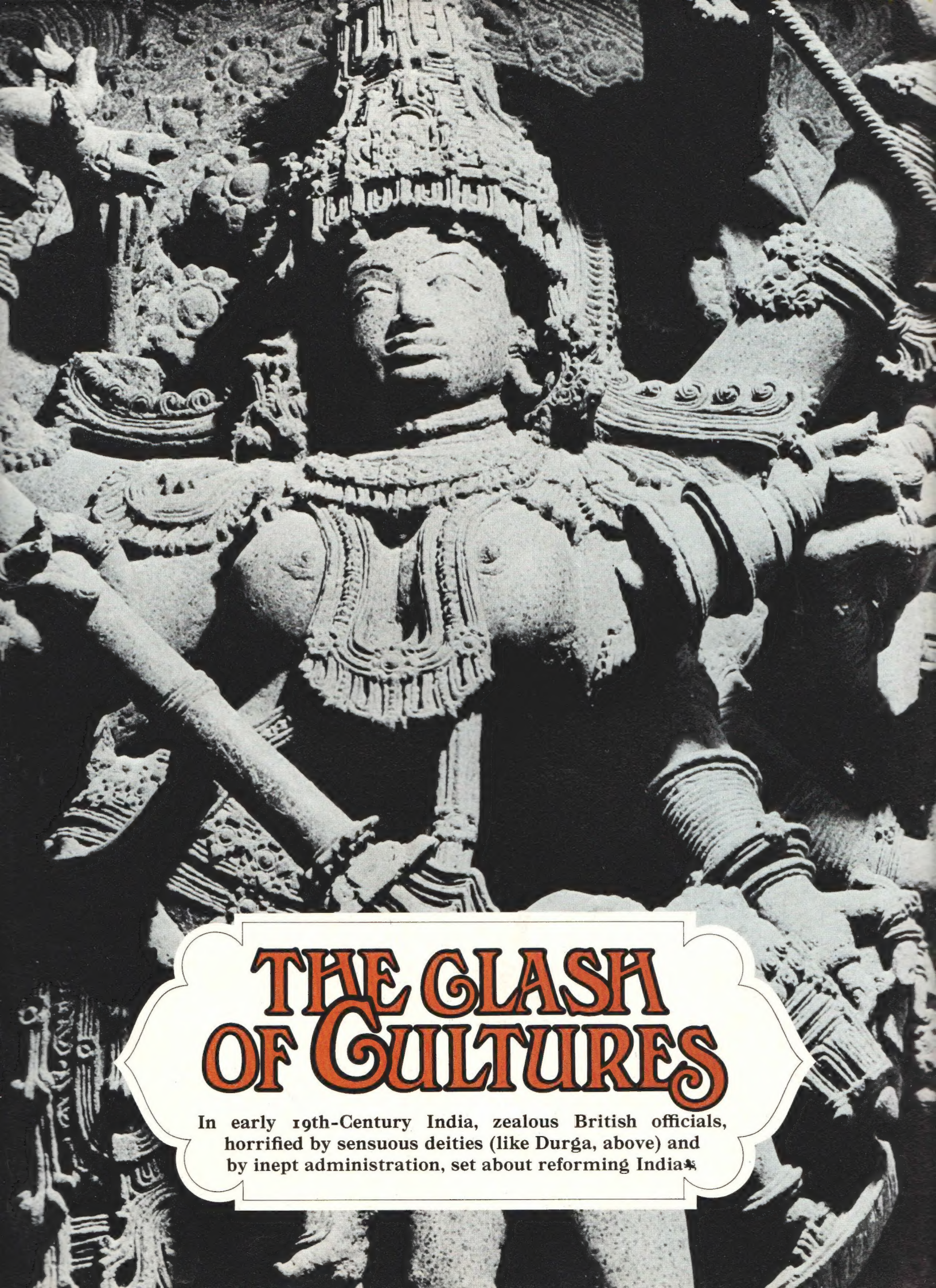

THE CLASH OF CULTURES

In early 19th-Century India, zealous British officials, horrified by sensuous deities (like Durga, above) and by inept administration, set about reforming India.

by Barry Pree

The British ruled India in the early 19th Century with a dual morality, gradually modifying what had been purely imperialistic adventure with the ideals of a civilizing zeal that assumed the right to reform Indian society in its own high-minded image. To the Indians, who, within a generation, had seen British rule become the dominating force of the sub-continent, each reform seemed a further attack on their weakening traditional order. To the British, any resistance smacked of ingratitude. Both sides came to feel a deepening insecurity that was finally, in 1857, to erupt in Mutiny.

India had not been conquered because of any innate superiority of the British (although it became fashionable for Englishmen to think so), but because of a general political malaise marked by internal divisions. There had been many individually brilliant Indian leaders, but none of them had been able to provide India with a single unifying force, or to stem the anarchy that had wasted the resources of the country and dissipated the political energy of its people.

Nor had the Indian leaders grasped the powerful reasons that drove the British to expand. At first, it was argued that the Napoleonic Wars and the French threat to British interests fully justified the expansion of power that began under Lord Wellesley's guidance in 1798. But after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, it became obvious that the real motive behind the decision to take India was – and had been – commercial.

The East India Company's trade had become unprofitable. Trade had been limited to the areas of British influence and had centred mainly on cotton and textiles in the north, saltpetre in Bengal, and spices and indigo elsewhere. When the British took over Bengal, the Company's profits had to be poured back into the state coffers to supplement the heavy costs of administration, for which the collected land-revenue alone was not sufficient. The Company's real wealth, which by any reckoning was immense, had become dependent on China, where tea was paid for by the notorious trade in Indian opium.

The hegemony of India guaranteed the security of this trade and, since the Company had lost its monopoly of trade when its 20-year Charter came up for renewal in 1813, promised an extra boost to its prosperity. Its would-be competitors in London were also happy to have access to a gigantic new market.

But the early excitement of conquest subsided quickly when the British paused to take stock of their achievement: the complexity of the task before them was one of daunting enormity.

The British Indian state that had been put in Wellesley's charge in 1798 had covered Bengal and Bihar, with dependencies in Madras and Bombay, and contained about 30 million inhabitants. Now it covered almost the entire sub-continent, an area of more than a million square miles, and had a population of an estimated 250 million.

Its states were highly individual, each bound to its own complex traditions, and all apparently immune to transferences of power. Only Bengal, once a rich and powerful Mughal province, had as yet felt the full impact of British rule; its people, "the soft Bengalees," whose fate began to plague the English conscience, had not yet recovered from the brutal treatment they had received during the Clive era. Elsewhere, the old patterns of Indian life remained relatively undisturbed. Even the city of Madras, which had been held by the British for years, still retained the outward trappings and air of its former leisurely and prosperous Indian tradition. In the north-west was the kingdom of the decadent Nawab of Oudh, whose cruel oppression held his people in a condition of apathetic despair. Mysore, in the centre of the predominantly Muslim south, had been tamed, but was still suspicious and sullenly anti-British. In the centre of the sub-continent, the Nizam of Hyderabad, a country larger than Spain, governed with the same diplomatic tact that had always been needed in order to remain free within a geographical trap. On its borders and throughout the vast wastes of central India were the few remaining fragments of the great Maratha Confederacy, whose fighting chiefs had once controlled almost half of India, including the glittering old Mughal capital of Delhi. To the north-west cut off by deserts, and freed of Maratha control, Rajputana had sunk back into its traditional feudal isolation. Further north, held in check by a peace treaty, lay the kingdom of the Punjab, ruled by the religiously militant Sikhs and their brilliant leader, Ranjit Singh.

Ranjit Singh, one-eyed creator of the independent Sikh kingdom, often drank himself into oblivion with a fiery potion of opium and alcohol.

Englishmen could discern only one factor common to the various states – and they were to learn by hard experience that it was the primary factor: the all-pervasive power of religion.

The great majority of Indians were Hindus. But the ordinary Englishman had no idea of what this meant and what he could glean repulsed him. Polytheistic, unorganized, non-dogmatic, Hinduism was a way of life rather than an institutional religion in the Western sense. It was very ancient – some 3,000 years old – and its cults, customs and mysteries were so embedded in the hearts of its followers that it had become a life in itself, governing all political, social and emotional behaviour. Its gods and rituals varied according to area and individual tradition; it was elusive, undefinable, sometimes barbarous, sometimes of striking beauty. Its most powerful characteristic was the caste system. There are about 3,000 castes today, ranging from Brahmin priests to Untouchables; the castes govern – then as now – the entire fabric of the lives of their adherents, and therefore of

most of India. Caste determined each man's social function. Loss of caste, which could be incurred by even unintentional infringements of religious law, meant a fate beyond the comprehension of a Westerner, something deeper and more terrible than any Christian concept of Hell.

Next to Hinduism, the most important religion was that of Islam, which had been brought to India by the Mughals. It was monotheistic, and its god was the all-seeing, all-hearing, all-speaking, all-powerful Allah, who controlled the destinies of all men, and whose Will was to be served in all things by all Muslims.

There were also other religions: Jainism, founded in about 600 B.C., with its concept of a universal law; Buddhism, which had been almost wiped out in India by the Mughals; there were Parsees, followers of the Persian prophet Zoroaster; Sikhism, which began in the Punjab in the 15th Century as a search for the truth which Sikhs believed underlay all religions, and evolved as religious militantism; there were even Christian and Jewish sects of ancient origin.

The power of religion, a power alien to an Englishman, was most noticeable in the Indians' apparently placid acceptance of whatever condition in which they found themselves. Two-thirds of the total population lived off the land, in communal societies in about half a million villages.

It was a precarious living. The landscape was extreme – great mountain ranges fell away to vast plains that were mostly arid; extravagant tropical growth fringed valleys that were either very fertile or useless swamps. The climate was either hot and dusty, or hot and wet; the rainfall was unpredictable; and there were monsoons, on which millions depended for water, but which were frequently of devastating strength, bringing catastrophe and famine in their wake. The Indians seemed to accept everything as being integral to some divine plan; and it was a condition that Englishmen – for want of better words – called "eternal" or "timeless."

The effect had been heightened by war. Its scars were everywhere: dried canals, neglected roads, straying and dead livestock, ruined crops, deserted villages – the countryside seemed without life, its land exhausted, its people inactive. And only in a few cities, mostly ports, was there any sign of former commercial prosperity. The once great textile industry was in decline, partly because of the internal disorder of the country, but also because machine-made goods from Lancashire had begun to dominate the English market, squeezing out the goods that had been imported from India, and had even begun to invade the native Indian market. The commercial decline in India was accompanied by a parallel lack of interest in the cultivation of the traditional arts and sciences.

All this – the political, social and economic condition of 250 million Indians – was to be re-ordered and ruled by a few hundred Englishmen, most of whom were in their twenties, supported by an army of 13,000 British troops.

There were realists among the young administrators who fully understood the delicacy of the situation. Charles Metcalfe, who would have been Governor-General had he been less determined on liberalizing the Press was one: "Our domination in India is by conquest; it is naturally disgusting to the inhabitants and can only be maintained by military force. It is our positive duty to render them justice, protect their rights, and to study their happiness. By the performance of this duty, we may allay and keep dormant their innate disaffection . . ." he wrote. But in England it was a time of debate. The intellectual ramifications of the American and French revolutions were still being felt and the thinkers of the age were obsessed with the nature of man and its perfectibility. In 1818, they began to focus their attention on India: the subcontinent was to become a political laboratory.

The prevailing attitude was conservative. It held that India should be ruled along the lines already established by Charles Cornwallis: law and order should be maintained as a solid basis for secure trade, but there should be no radical interference in the social and religious institutions and customs of Indians – to interfere would be to tap a volcano. But there were many men of influence in England who believed that this 18th-Century attitude, devoted as it was to outdated commercial interests, was no longer feasible in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, and even immoral.

The first challenge came from the Evangelical Revival of the 18th Century. Its members included powerful figures such as William Wilberforce, the campaigner against slavery, and Charles Grant, a Chairman of the Company Directors. They believed that Indian society was fundamentally wicked and they proposed a total Anglicization of India by means of Christian education. They considered the religions of India to be "one grand abomination," the reason why the Indians were "a race of men lamentably base and degenerate." The intentions of the Evangelicals were defined by Wilberforce as "the gradual introduction and establishment of our own principles and opinions; of our laws, institutions, and manners; above all, as the source of every other improvement, of our religion, and consequently of our morals." The

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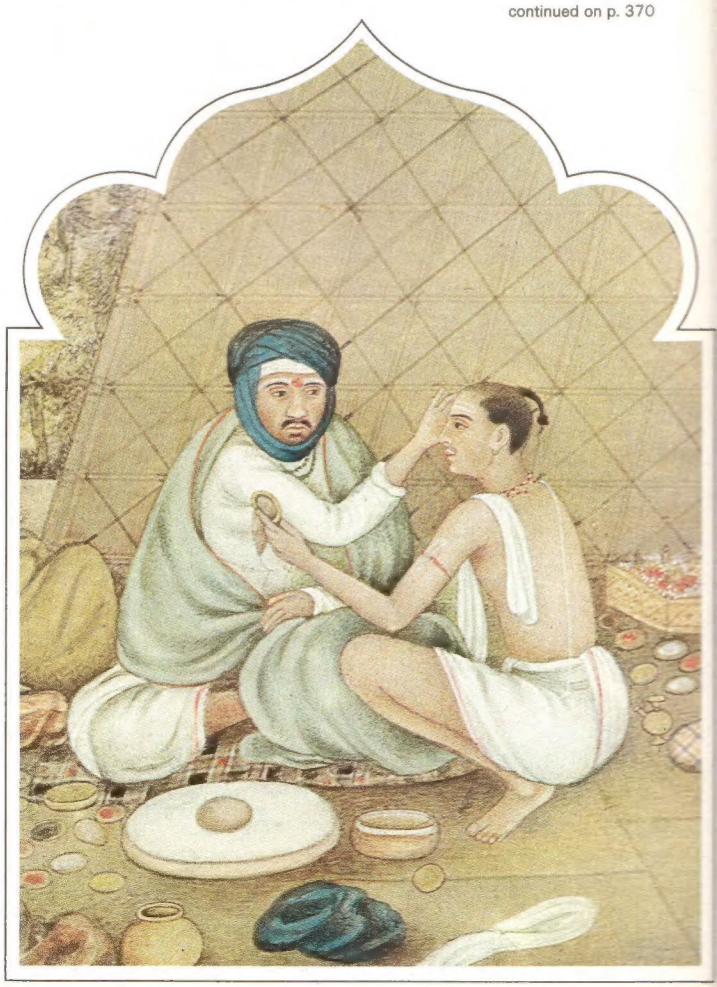


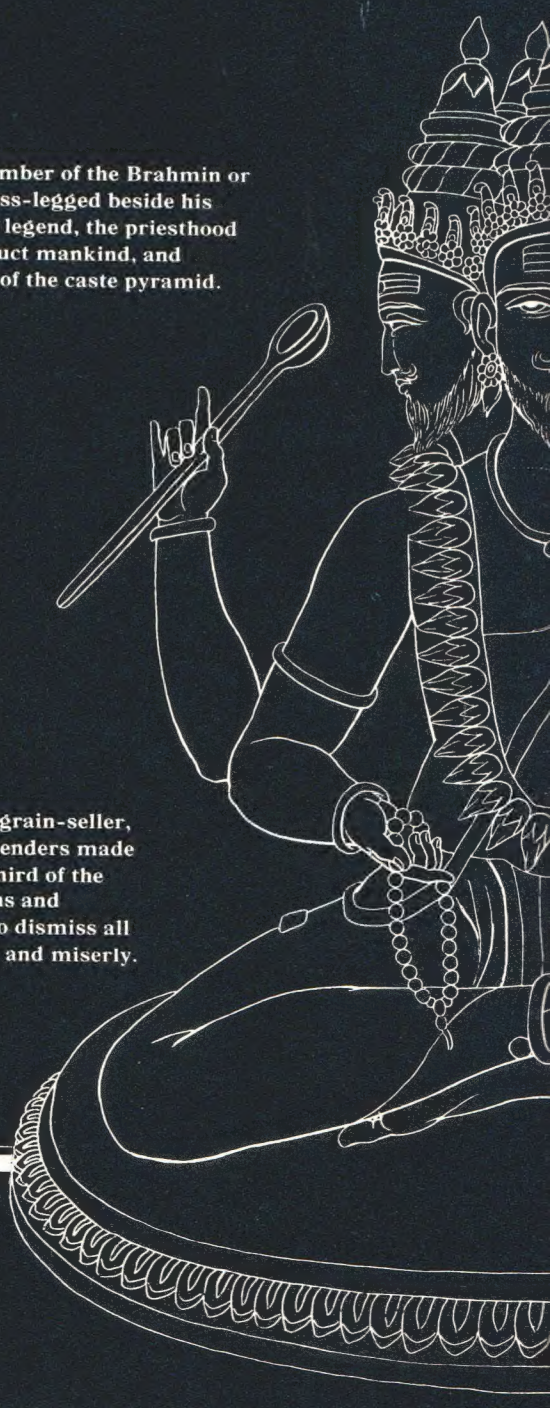
A priest of the Brahmin caste (left) marks a pilgrim for admission to a temple. The Brahmins were at the apex of the system of Hindu castes, some of which are represented on the text pages of this issue.

SHACKLES

Every Hindu's class, trade and life-style was predetermined by whichever of the 3,000 castes, grouped in four major divisions, he was born into. An ancient Hindu hymn claims that each division – Brahmins, Kshattriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras – sprang from the severed body of Purusha, the primeval male form of the Creator, Brahma (below). Although

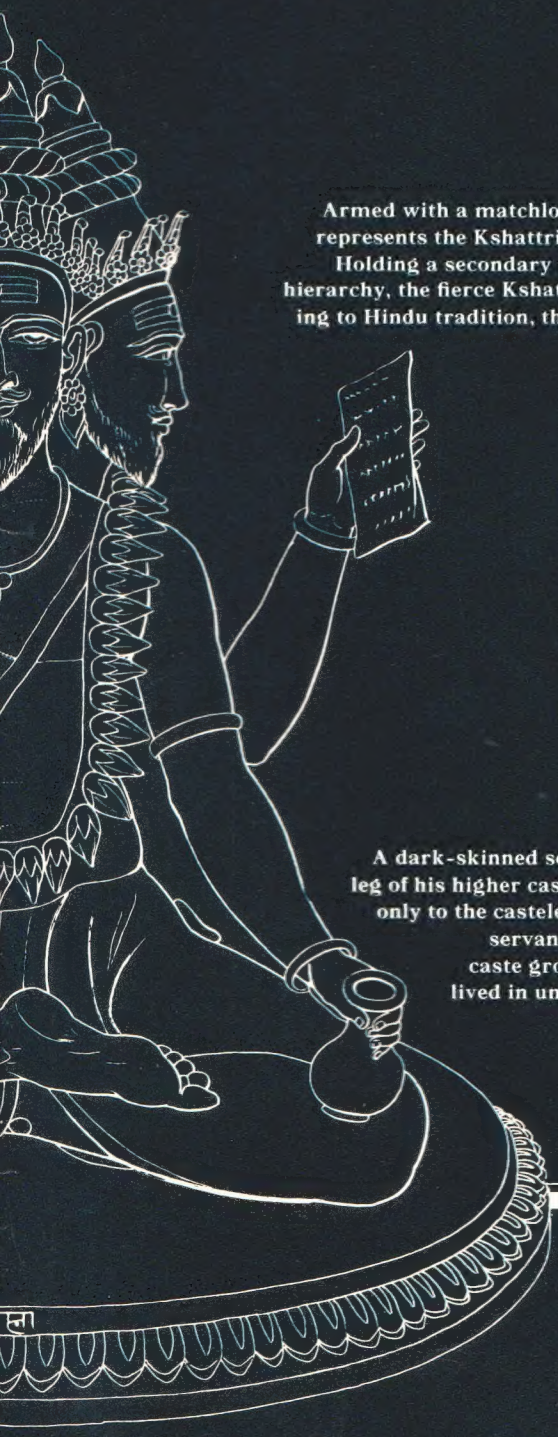
An astrologer, a member of the Brahmin or priest caste, sits cross-legged beside his books. According to legend, the priesthood was created to instruct mankind, and occupy the pinnacle of the caste pyramid.

Merchants, like this grain-seller, traders and money-lenders made up the Vaisyas, the third of the four castes. Brahmins and Kshattriyas tended to dismiss all Vaisyas as dishonest and miserly.

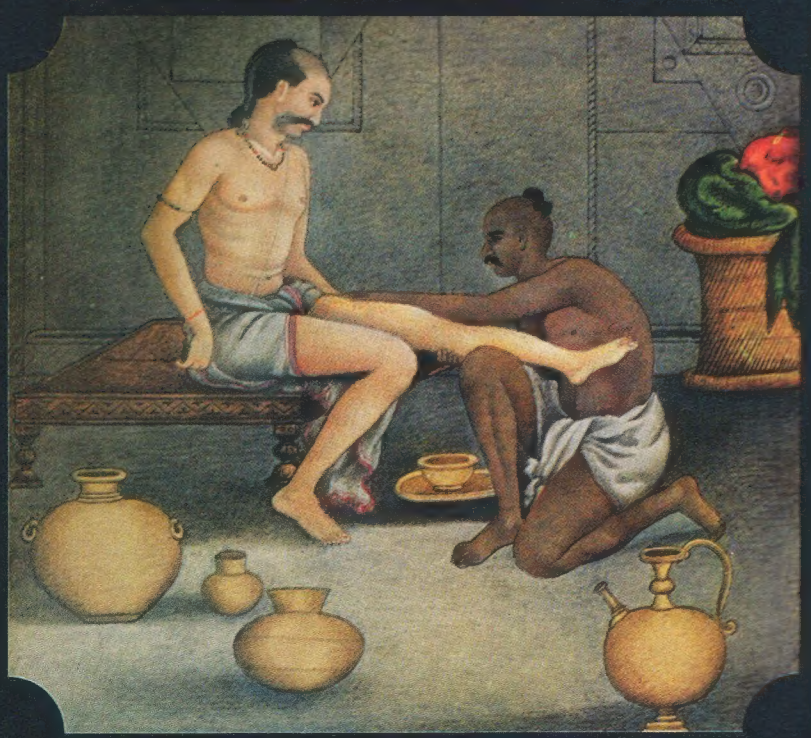


OF CASTE

recent research has shown that this account was probably a forgery perpetrated by the Brahmin priesthood to enhance its own prestige, it was taken by Hindus as a divine injunction to establish a social system that was uniquely intricate, rigid and stratified. At best it made for social stability; at worst it was a justification for cruelty and oppression.



Armed with a matchlock, this soldier aptly represents the Kshattriya, or warrior caste. Holding a secondary position in the social hierarchy, the fierce Kshattriyas were, according to Hindu tradition, the defenders of India.



A dark-skinned servant massages the leg of his higher caste master. Superior only to the casteless "Untouchables," servants formed the fourth caste group, the Sudras, and lived in unremitting servitude.

Evangelicals scored their first significant victory when, in 1813, they secured the admission of missionaries into India.

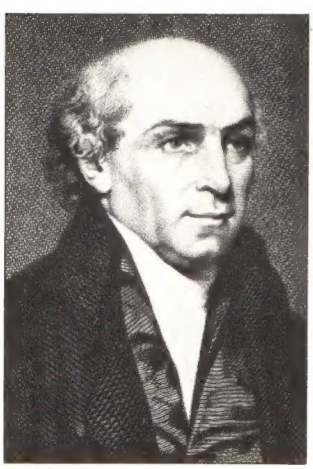
On an altogether different level were those who believed that the highest social ideal, the answer to all society's ills, was to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This philosophy, known as "Utilitarianism," attempted to judge every social measure by its "utility" or the degree to which it tended to increase happiness. Its main exponent, Jeremy Bentham, defined happiness only in terms of a lack of hardship and the shallowness of this view was amply demonstrated by one of Bentham's disciples, James Mill, a senior official in the East India Company, who according to his son, John Stuart Mill, "had scarcely any belief in pleasure." The philosophy nevertheless provided a useful yardstick in making a practical start to the removal of patent injustices, as another of Bentham's followers, Lord William Bentinck, was to show when he became Governor-General of India in 1828.

Like the Evangelicals, the Utilitarians were convinced of the natural superiority of the West and were contemptuous of Indian customs and culture. But they attributed the sins of the country not to its religions, but to the greatest of India's hardships – the inhuman poverty in which the majority of its inhabitants lived. Poverty, James Mill wrote, was "the effect of bad laws and bad government;

India's Selfless Servants

Sir Charles Metcalfe

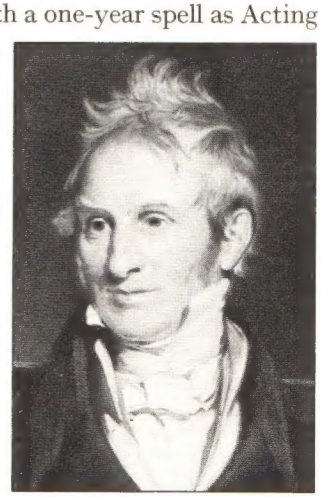
The British had seized India by the sword and ruled it for their own gain, but by the early 19th Century, the tide of opinion had turned against so expensive and degrading a system. Many of the East India Company's officials were eager to give their military dominance a moral and religious justification. A new breed of men now came to India, some startlingly liberal in outlook, some paternalistic and authoritarian, but all linked by an unprecedented dedication to the task of honest administration and reform. One of the most enlightened was Sir Charles Metcalfe. Ten years after joining the East India Company as a clerk in 1801, he became Resident of Delhi, and astounded his contemporaries by introducing a revolutionary humanitarian penal code. At a time when a thief in England would be hanged for stealing five shillings, Metcalfe abolished all forms of capital punishment and outlawed flogging. He banned slavery in his area and suttee (the burning of Hindu widows on the funeral-pyres of their husbands). On one occasion, he impounded all the spears and swords he could find, beat them into plough-shares and pruning-hooks in the best Biblical tradition, and returned them to their astonished owners. He climaxed his career with a one-year spell as Acting Governor-General, during which he abolished Press censorship – a move so unpopular with the Company's Directors that they refused to confirm his appointment.



William Carey

would render it impossible for a foreign nation to retain government." In 1819, he became Governor of Bombay and immediately set about improving native education, for he believed that only in this way could India eradicate what to him was an accursed trio: debt, apathy and the Hindu custom of child marriage. Although Elphinstone was a man of great industry, he had little political ambition and always found time to ride, hunt and read books in Greek, Latin or Persian. He refused the offer to become Governor-General and in 1827 he left Bombay for England, and for the things he missed most, his books and friends.

Many of the men who served India so diligently were of humble origin. William Carey, a Baptist missionary, who arrived in Calcutta in 1793 was a shoemaker by profession. The East India Company felt the Gospel's heady message of freedom would incite rebellion and Carey fled into the interior to avoid arrest. From a remote, up-country indigo plantation he began to translate the New Testament into Bengali. After that he went on to translate the entire Bible into Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi. On his extensive preaching tours of Bengal, Carey advised all he met to "attempt great things for God." In 1819 he opened India's first college for the study of Eastern literature and European science.



Mountstuart Elphinstone

Mountstuart Elphinstone, a Scottish peer's son, also began his career as a Company clerk in Calcutta in 1795. In his twenties, as the East India Company's Resident among the intrigue-ridden Marathas of western India, he developed remarkably liberal views on Britain's role in India: the most desirable aim, he said "should be the improvement of the natives to such a pitch as

Sir Thomas Munro also had a passionate concern for the Indian peasantry. As a junior official in newly annexed lands near Madras he devoted himself tirelessly to the suppression of murder and robbery. When he became Governor of Madras he refused to accept the traditional method of raising taxes – by auctioning off the job to contractors who invariably made extortionate demands on the peasantry – and created instead a corps of scrupulously honest government revenue collectors.

Sir Thomas Munro

and is never characteristic of any people who are governed well." He believed that once the poverty of India had been relieved, Indians would begin to tread the path of Western reason and enlightenment: therein lay the best – and only – security for British interests. Mill's ideas were contained in his three great projects for humanitarian, but decidedly authoritarian, reform – a new method of revenue assessment, codification of the law, and the creation of a strong central government responsible for the whole country.

A third opposition group was in a position to bring about direct changes to India. It was composed of men who had been active participants in the British rise to power and who now held important positions in the administration – Thomas Munro, the leader of the group, Charles Metcalfe, Mountstuart Elphinstone, and John Malcolm (who gave the group a motto: "Let us, therefore, calmly proceed in a course of gradual improvement"). The Munro school had great sympathy for the Indians and their culture; it subscribed to the "noble savage" philosophy, which asserted that man's innate goodness, corrupted by society, was still to be found in primitive communities. It sounded a romantic view, but the four men were by no means dreamers; they were experienced and practical administrators who foresaw the dangers of radical change. "The ruling vice of our Government is innovation," Munro wrote, and he added that innovation often seemed to the Indians to be "little better than the result of mere caprice."

Munro believed strongly in the involvement of the administration with the people, rather than the simple dictation to them of British principles (of which he nevertheless steadfastly approved.) He wanted to close the gap between the rulers and the ruled, and he despised his fellow countrymen who maintained that Indians were too corrupt to take part in government (Cornwallis had banished them from responsible positions in the civil service): "Foreign conquerors have treated the natives with violence and often with great cruelty, but none has treated them with so much scorn as we, none has stigmatized the whole people as unworthy of trust," Munro wrote.

Munro achieved a considerable victory over conservative opinion when, as Governor of Madras, he condemned the Cornwallis revenue system and forced recognition of his own methods. Land-revenue was the administration's chief source of income. It had been traditionally collected by hereditary *zamindars*, a go-between class of government agents. It had always been a chaotic and complicated business, shrouded in intimidation and secrecy: no one ever knew how much the *zamindars* squeezed from the villagers. Cornwallis had changed their status by making them landlords. The peasants were dispossessed of their ancient hereditary rights to the land they cultivated, and the *zamindars* acquired all proprietary rights, including sale and purchase. In return, the *zamindars* had to collect revenue for the administration at a fixed annual fee. At first, the fee was too high (£3,000,000 altogether in Bengal) and many *zamindars* who could not get the money out of their tenants, or find new tenants who could pay, had to sell up. A new Indian class emerged: land-speculators, the absentee landlords of the cities, represented by new *zamindars* with little or no feeling for the traditional rural life. The result was a slow but serious disruption of the patterns of communal peasant life. "We have, in our anxiety to make everything as English as possible in a country which resembles England in nothing, attempted to create . . . a kind of landed property which had never existed . . ." Munro complained. At the same time, Cornwallis took away the former judiciary powers of the *zamindars*, thus widening the gulf between the administration and its subjects. In Munro's *ryotwari* system, the peasant dealt directly with the government and acquired his own proprietary rights to land, and the Collector regained his former police powers: it was a halfway return to tradition, and it was adopted by the Munro school wherever possible, effectively reversing the structure built by Cornwallis.

But the Utilitarians and Evangelicals were closer to the seat of power in London than the "romantic" administrators, and in 1828, their efforts were rewarded when Lord Bentinck was sent to India as Governor-General with a mandate for dramatic reform that was a concentrated amalgam of their radical ideals.

Bentinck began with a frontal attack on the social evils of India. This he did in the name of "universal moral law" (that is, British moral law), and it won the unqualified approval of the British public, whose imagination was captured by the exotic details of the campaign. British rule in India now openly took on the character of a moral crusade – its former essentially commercial nature was lost to public view.

Social evils certainly existed in India. One of the worst of these was the custom of killing girl babies to avoid the prohibitive marriage settlements with which they would otherwise have to be settled. It was a custom of great antiquity practised by "primitive" tribes and some Rajput castes. Rajputs sometimes sold their female children, but, in doing so, they forever lost their caste. Murder was therefore thought to be more desirable,

Certain men of the Sudra caste earned a good living by sieving the refuse of goldsmiths' and silversmiths' shops for small particles of gold and silver lost during manufacture.

and since women were anyway considered to be property, useful or not, it was viewed as a practical convenience.

The child was murdered in the room in which it was born. Often the mother either refused to suckle the child or rubbed opium on her nipples. The child's mouth was filled with certain herbs and then covered with the first faeces the child passed. It was then buried – dead or alive – in the earth that was the floor of the room. Cow dung was distributed over the earth to act as a disinfectant. Thirteen days later, a priest was invited to cook a prescribed meal which he ate together with the parents in the room. The meal acted as an offering, and the priest took the sins of the deed upon himself. Afterwards, the parents could again occupy the room and resume normal life.

In Bengal in 1795 the British had declared the practice to be murder and banned it. But it was difficult to enforce this since it meant policing the most private domains of the Indians. Persistent endeavours of British administrators during Bentinck's rule brought the practice under control. But it was a slow process, and as late as 1870, the government had to pass another act to ensure that all births were registered and to check that female children remained alive.

Suttee, the self-immolation of widows, was equally offensive to the "universal moral law." Again, it was an extremely ancient custom, practised mainly by higher castes among Hindus. In theory, it was a voluntary death in which a widow elected to join her husband in death by throwing herself on to his funeral-pyre. The suttee (from *sati*, meaning "virtuous one") was enacted in the ecstatic atmosphere of a religious festival. There had been legendarily spectacular suttees: a Sikh prince had been accompanied in death by ten wives and 300 concubines, and – in 1780 – a Rajah of Marwar had been followed in flames by his 64 wives. But even the ordinary village suttee carried great prestige for the family concerned if it was well arranged and executed. It was not only a matter of prestige: a suttee left the dead man's relatives free to divide his property without the interfering claims of a widow; and it meant one less mouth to feed.

The practice may originally have been an act of suicide, but with time it began to verge on murder. A British report noted in 1818: "There are very many reasons for thinking that such an event as a voluntary suttee rarely occurs . . ." The widow was either worn down to the point of agreement to the act by overpowering persuasion, or else subjected to it by physical force. According to the report: "Should utter indifference for her husband, and superior sense, enable her to preserve her judgement, and to resist the arguments of those about her, it will avail her little – the people will not be disappointed of their show; and the entire population of the village will turn out to assist in dragging her to the bank of the river, and in keeping her on the pile." In one case, a woman did escape from a pyre; she was found hiding in woods by her son, who dragged her back to the fire and threw her into the flames.

The Muslims found the practice repulsive, and Mughal rulers had tried to forbid it. Wellesley, too, had had little success in effecting a ban – the government of the day was reluctant to act for fear of inflaming Indian resentment. A compromise measure was taken in 1812, when suttee became legal only in cases where the act was voluntary and the victim was over 16 years of age and not pregnant. The suttees then came under the supervision of the police.

But the presence of police only gave the impression of government approval, and the number of suttees increased: 839 cases were reported in Bengal in 1818, more than double the figure for 30 years earlier. Hindus had let it be known they would react violently to a complete abolition of suttee. The Hindu reformer, Ram Mohun Roy, had preached that suttee was not condoned by Hindu scripture, and he had met with fierce opposition and threats from the leading Hindu institutions. But the pressure in England for abolition was enormous; Bentinck had to risk the consequences; he could not afford to fail. Suttee was declared illegal in 1829. Surprisingly, there was no immediate Indian reaction.

Bentinck's next act of reform not only did not meet with any hostility, it was actually welcomed: this was the move to suppress Thuggee. The Thugs were robber-bands who roamed central and northern India and practised ritual murder by strangling their arbitrarily chosen victims with scarves. According to legend – they had been part of India for centuries – they had been given divine sanction to kill by the goddess Kali, providing they used a square of cloth and shed no blood. The destruction of life was the prime motive; the profits from robbery the recompense. Bentinck ordered the suppression of Thuggee in 1829.

One other social problem in India, insidiously more evil than the rest, attracted much less public attention and became therefore more difficult to eradicate. From the beginning, there had been British administrators who had deplored the Indian slave traffic; but they had always balked at any solution. A British official in Calcutta noted in 1785 that: "Hardly a man or woman exists in a corner of this populous town who hath not at least one slave child, either purchased at a trifling price or saved for a life that seldom fails of being miserable."

Cornwallis had tried to limit the slave traffic by preventing the export of slaves overseas and to parts of India not under British control. But the government had been unwilling to take any really drastic action for fear of jeopardizing its relationship with the powerful slave-traders. As a token gesture to English conscience, the importation of slaves into India from elsewhere had been prohibited in 1811. But the trade still flourished, and in 1812, Metcalfe had discovered that in Delhi, which he administered, the number of slave-merchants had actually increased. He reacted by forbidding the resale of slaves – and he was severely censured for his interference. The government considered his measure one that "his Lordship in Council was not prepared to sanction." Bentinck approached the problem with extreme caution, and he managed to halt the flow of traffic to some degree by stopping the sale of slaves between individual districts. The Charter Act of 1833 stipulated that he was to abolish slavery altogether – when it proved feasible to do so. But apparently it never did. Slavery continued as before and did not become completely illegal until the Crown assumed power in India in 1858.

HOLY MURDER

Thuggee: assassination in the name of piety.

In an 18th-Century painting, Kali is depicted as the "Black One," the terrible form in which the Thugs worshipped her. In the many Hindu legends of Kali, the goddess takes variable roles. Here, imbued with the spirits of the chief Hindu deities, she is the central active figure in the cycle of creation, conservation and destruction. Hence she is portrayed sitting on her husband Shiva "the Destroyer" (shown in a double manifestation) and attended by the multi-headed Brahma "the Creator" (far right), and Krishna "the Conserver" (left, his hands clasped). Two Kali-like sword-bearers present bowls of blood, while pariah dogs and birds of prey consume corpses to emphasize Kali's destructive aspects.

Worshippers of a Diabolical Goddess

Although the word "thug" is a now familiar synonym for any violent criminal, the original meaning was far more sinister. The Thugs, whose name derives from the Sanskrit word for deceiver, were a secret brotherhood of stranglers who had terrorized travellers for centuries. It was not until 1826, however, that the British revealed the startling facts about Thuggee, as the sect was called.

Despite their traditional enmity, both Hindus and Muslims embraced Thuggee as a fraternity ordained by the Hindu goddess Kali. According to Thug mythology, Kali once encountered a man-eating demon. She cut the monster in half with her sword, but a new fiend sprang from every drop of his blood. Faced with an ever-renewed horde, the goddess miraculously created two warriors from her perspiration and gave to each of them a yellow *rhumal* – a strip of cloth – with which to strangle her foes. Kali then ordered her warriors to perpetuate from generation to generation the secret work of destroying in this way those who were not their kindred.

Dressed in red robes, symbolic of her role as the "man-eater," Kali is pictured holding a severed head she is about to devour.

This map, with dots representing the places where Thugs regularly buried their victims, shows the extent of Thug activity in part of the Oudh territory in northern India.

Crusader against Murder

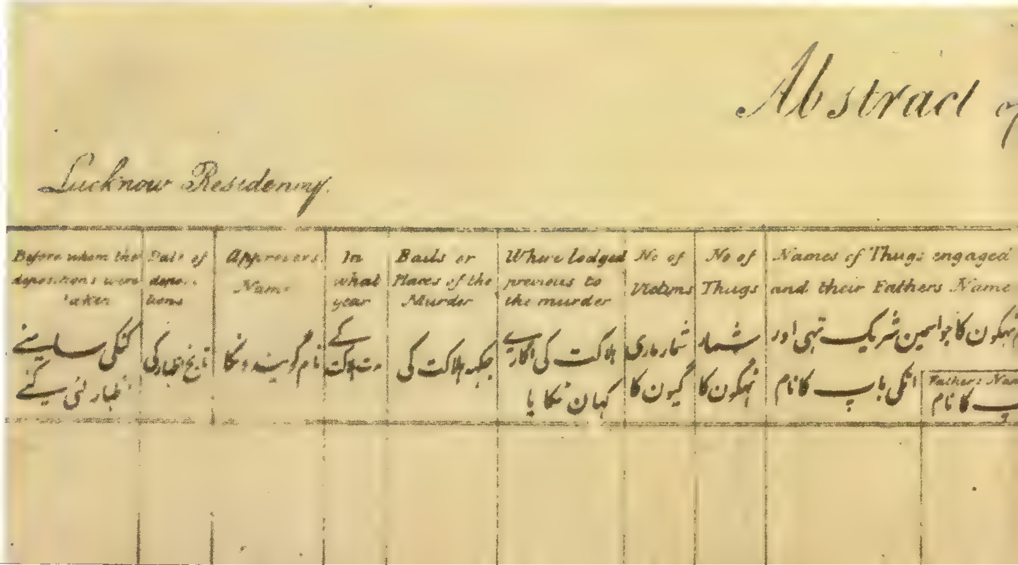
In 1826, Colonel William Sleeman, who had devoted years to gathering scraps of information about Thuggee, was given the task of suppressing the cult in Jubbulpore, north-east India, where he was Civil Administrator. He faced formidable problems. The Thugs led outwardly respectable lives, operating far from home to avoid recognition. They preserved meticulous security with bribery and threats, initiated only their sons into the fraternity, and never selected victims – like Europeans – who could be traced to their home villages.

To break through the Thuggee veil of secrecy, Sleeman painstakingly compiled bits of information gleaned from villagers, officials and captured Thugs. As his records built up, he was able to work out Thug family trees and draw maps with which to trace Thugs and spot likely scenes of future murders. He was constantly amazed at what he discovered. One Thug claimed 931 murders and added, with considerable pride: "Sahib, there were many more, but I ceased counting when sure of my thousand!"

Reformed Thugs – now peaceable carpet-weavers – sit on an example of their new handicraft.

William Sleeman – "Thuggee" Sleeman as he came to be known – was a hard-headed Cornishman who stamped out Thuggee after 20 years of determined effort.

On forms like this, Sleeman's small team of aides scrupulously recorded evidence from captured Thugs. These records enabled him to plan his successful campaign.



Abstract of

Lucknow Residency.

Before whom the depositions were taken	Date of depositions	Approvers Name	In what year	Bails or Places of the Murder	Where lodged previous to the murder	No of Victims	No of Thugs	Names of Thugs engaged and their Fathers Name

Imaumbux
A notorious leader of Thugs.
Extract from his Confession

I am now 30 years of age. I have been a Thug by profession since I was about 10 or 11 years old. I have strangled about 100 men with my own hand and I have seen about 250 strangled. I was a leader of a Thug Gang of from 20 to 30 men and I have infested the high roads from Agra to Benares and throughout Oude. My Father before me Buslee was a notorious Thug and my Grand Father Shaick Allum was also a Thug.

This sketch of a captured Thug named Imaumbux includes his confession. Like many Thugs, he is clearly proud of his profession, which he adopted at the age of ten or 11. This pride is reflected in his arrogant pose, with the "rhumal" – or strangler's scarf – slung over his right shoulder.

vidence in the Case of

	Who in veigled	Stranglers	Holders of Hands and Feet	Where and by whom were disposed	Where and by whom the Spoil was distributed	Amount of the Plunder	Who got the
	کون لگا لایا	پھانسی کسنی والے	ہاتھ کسنی پکڑی	جہاں کہاں اور کسنی ڈالیں	اسباب کہاں بانٹا اور کسنی ڈالیں	تعداد نقد اور اسباب کی	کسنی پایا

Thugs direct the attention of a traveller skyward to position his neck for strangulation.

The End of a Menace

As Sleeman's campaign gained momentum, Thugs continued to operate in their traditional way. When the rainy season drew to a close, Thugs – some of them sepoys on leave from the East India Company's army – took to the roads in pursuit of their prey. When a group of travellers was found, the Thugs would ask to join them – "for protection" – and their conversation, singing and story-telling soon ingratiated them with their new companions.

A strangler Thug and two assistants would lure travellers to a selected place. Then, at a given signal, the murderers seized the victims' arms and legs, jerked the *rhumals* round their necks and in seconds it was over. The bodies were then stripped of valuables, cut open and

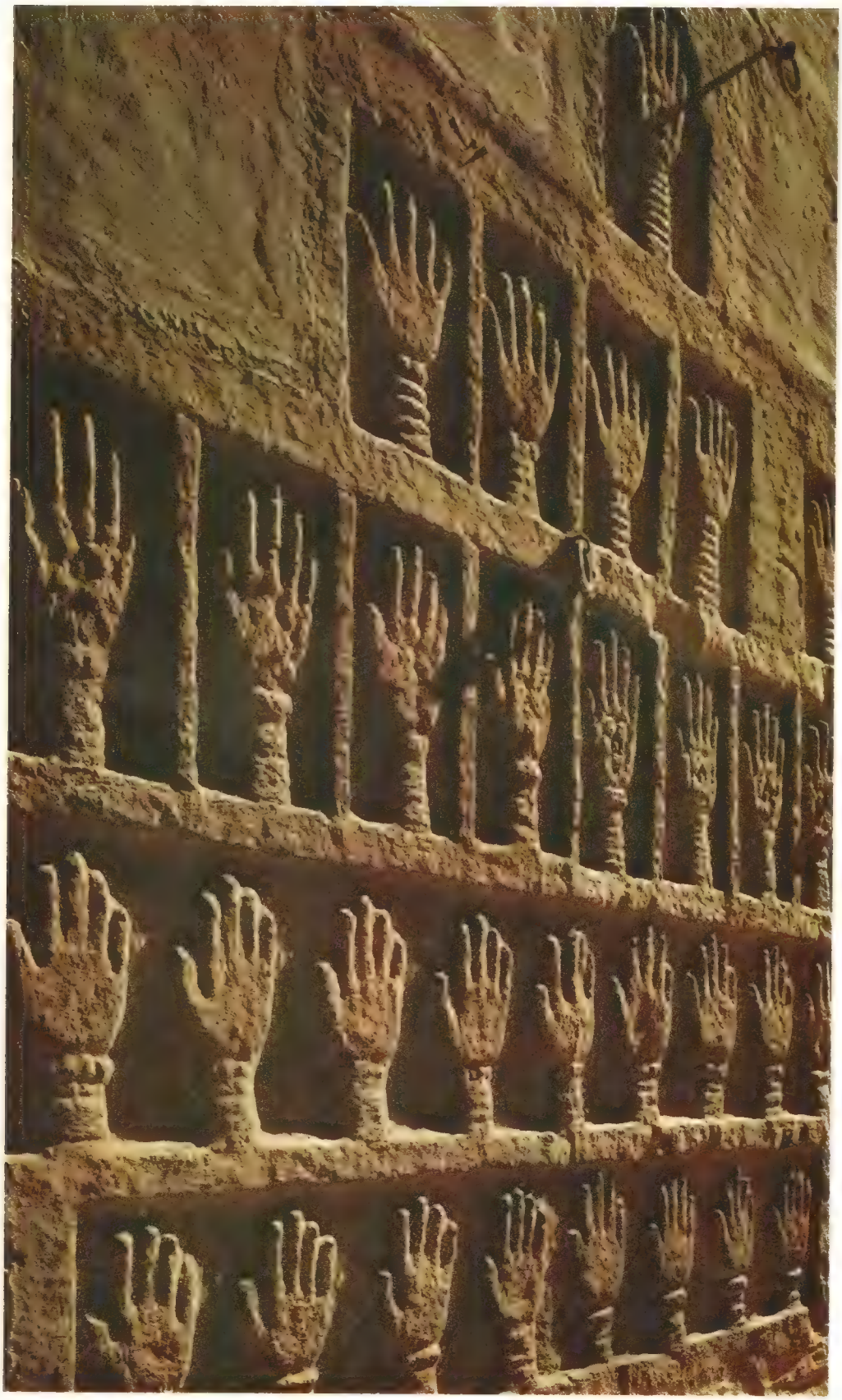
By gouging out the eyes of their victims before dropping their bodies down a well, Thugs ensure that the victims' spirits will be unable to haunt their murderers.

buried. It was a swift and efficient operation which, in the two centuries the British had been in India, accounted for some two million murders.

At first Sleeman was blocked by the Thugs' proud belief that their work was a predestined religious duty. Over 400 of Sleeman's captives went calmly to death by hanging rather than betray their religion. But gradually, some began to believe that Sleeman was an instrument of Kali sent to punish them for some imagined failure. Bowing to divine will, they turned informers. Success followed rapidly. In 1835, Sleeman was charged with the suppression of Thuggee throughout all India. By 1848, he had captured over 4,000 Thugs and except for isolated cases, the menace was ended.

Swiftly and practically, three Thugs sacrifice another victim to the insatiable Kali.

II. The Assault on Traditional India



Stone carvings on a wall at Jodhpur in north-west India represent the hands of Maharanis, Maharajahs' widows who perished on their husbands' funeral-pyres.

Bentinck was well satisfied. He had cauterized two of the great social cankers of India, and had brought two others under control – and the volcano had not stirred. But a shock had been felt: although the reforms had hardly touched Muslims, and only certain castes of Hindus in restricted areas, and at least one reform – the suppression of Thuggee – had been widely popular, they nevertheless produced an over-all effect by establishing the authoritarian presence and power of a Western God.

The power and authority of British rule was aptly described by a Frenchman, Victor Jacquement, who travelled across India in the 1830s: "The English, who inspire so much respect in the natives of India by their power, wealth and morality (always true to their word, upright and just ninety-nine times out of a hundred), who . . . receive from them so many Asiatically servile demonstrations of respect and submission – the English are the only people who do not take pleasure in these marks of respect. They esteem themselves too highly . . . to be flattered by their homage."

On a personal level, however, he thought that Englishmen paid a high price for their rectitude. "I am an English gentleman," he wrote in a satirical vein, "that is to say one of the most brilliant animals in all creation. I have left the joys of Europe, the charms of family life, behind me: I have come to live in this dog of a country." No wonder that Englishmen in India "are strangers to that tenderness . . . to which we continentals owe so many pleasures."

British feelings of superiority struck him particularly forcibly. Where a Frenchman in a remote area would think himself the first among many, the Englishman sees himself as "quite alone" – totally ignoring the Indian millions over whom he exercised authority.

So impressed was Jacquement with the benefits of British rule that he could not understand those who wished to educate Indians: "Some officials say openly that English supremacy in Asia cannot be eternal, and that it is their duty to humanity to prepare India to govern herself by raising the moral and intellectual capacity of its inhabitants. . . . If I thought that the foundation of English

schools would hasten the fall of English power, I would certainly close these schools, for . . . no national government would secure them the benefits which they owe to the British government."

But few British thought that far. General education in English was, as Bentinck said, to be a "panacea for the regeneration of India."

Education in India had become fossilized. Higher education for Hindus was almost exclusively the privilege of Brahmins, the priestly caste. It was conducted in Sanskrit, a dead language, and was concerned entirely with the study of religious texts. Muslim education was at least, in theory, available to all Muslims; but it, too, was conducted in a language (Arabic) not spoken in India, and it was equally esoteric in content. Indian governments had taken no responsibility for education and schools were dependent on communities and individual rulers for the funds they received.

Early British administrators had been unwilling to disrupt these patterns. Their interest was confined to token patronage: Warren Hastings had sponsored the College of Arabic and Persian Studies in Calcutta, and there was a Sanskrit college in Benares. The Charter Act of 1813 had set aside an annual sum of £10,000 for the education of the "Natives of India," but the government had not dictated a policy. Nevertheless, schools teaching Western subjects in English had sprung up following a widespread clamour for education by new middle-class Indians who saw it as the key to all success, and whose ambitions were vigorously supported by zealous missionaries determined to convert the Indians via Christian education away from "the degrading and polluting worship of idols." A Committee of Public Instruction had been formed in 1823 to shape a policy, and at first it had favoured the preservation of Oriental learning. Bentinck lost no time in altering the Committee's course. His arguments in favour of Western education carried the powerful backing of the Evangelical and Utilitarian groups in England; and he found additional support in Ram Mohun Roy, the Bengali reformer, who pleaded that Indians be allowed to study "mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, anatomy, and other useful sciences, which the natives of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world."

In 1829, Bentinck informed the Committee that: "It is the wish and admitted policy of the British Government to render its own language gradually and eventually the language of public business throughout the country, and that it will omit no opportunity of giving every reasonable and practical degree of encouragement to the execution of this project." Six years later, English also became the language of education, and consequently of the state. The historic Resolution of March 7, 1835, stated: "The great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India . . . all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone."

The first impact of Western science on India education was felt in the foundation of the Calcutta Medical College, which was meant to correct the disastrous state of public health caused by the decline of the ancient, rigid and superstition-ridden Muslim and Hindu medical systems. The first students were mostly Muslims. In 1836, there was an important breakthrough for progressive Hindus when a Hindu student – to the horror of the orthodox – performed a dissection: the government fired a salute of guns from Fort William to honour the occasion.

A fuller impact came later when Indians trained in Western technology began to construct and administer canals, roads and railways. The Indian canal system, vital for the irrigation of crops and supply of water to industry, had been created by the Mughals centuries before. Much of it had been destroyed by war, most of it had fallen into disuse. Restoration was begun by the British in 1815, under Lord Hastings, with the reconstruction of the 445-mile Western Jumna Canal; the Eastern Jumna Canal was completed in 1830. The most important project sponsored by the British was the Ganges Canal, which by 1856 was 450 miles long. Additionally, a dam was built across the Coleroon River in Madras in 1836, and in 1853, work was begun on a dam across the Krishna River. These irrigation works were highly profitable for the Company; water dues and increased revenue assessment more than adequately covered the costs: and it was frustrating to administrators in India that their government at home agreed to such projects only with heavy reluctance. There had been very few roads before the Bentinck regime; British goods had been transported from one part of India to another either by river vessels or, in the dry season, by whatever tracks were usable. The government began to construct roads in 1830 – the first was between Bombay and Poona – and in 1839, the decision was taken to build what became the famous Grand Trunk Road, 1,000 miles of highway stretching from Calcutta to Delhi. Roads were also built between Madras and Bombay (800 miles) and Bombay and Agra (900 miles): all of which helped to occupy the ever-increas-

Perfumers, who belong to a sub-caste of the Vaisyas, sell essences and scented oils made of wild fruits, flowers and herbs; they are also proprietors of chemists' shops.

ing drifting labour population of dispossessed peasants, and at the same time, to facilitate quicker – and more – trade. The railways, however, did not make their appearance in India until mid century and only 300 miles of track had been completed before the Mutiny of 1857.

Generally, Western education resulted in more Indian participation in the running of their own country. Bentinck deliberately reversed the Cornwallis policy of anglicization of the administration; and although Bentinck's Indian administrators had to be carefully nurtured in a Western outlook before they could be promoted to responsible positions, his decision carried at least the shadow of liberal toleration.

It was also during Bentinck's rule that the Law Commission was formed. It was headed by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, poet, historian and politician whose legendary garrulousness once drew from the wit and cleric, Sydney Smith, the rejoinder: "Macaulay, when I'm dead you'll be sorry you never heard me speak." The Law Commission was set up in order to find a uniform legal code, the elusive dream of all British administrators in India. Earlier legal innovations had failed to eradicate the mystery and confusion that hindered effective rendering of justice: it was ironic that law, and consequently order, the keystone of British policy in India, was to be the last – and the most enduring – of their major reforms.

The administration of Indian law had been seriously neglected during the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the decades of war that followed. But ancient Hindu and Islamic legal systems did survive in some areas in the village council the *panchayat*, an institution which could only act with the consent of those involved in a quarrel, and which had no definitive code or means of enforcement British lawyers investigating Indian justice found it to be either corrupt or obscure, negligible or non-existent. Hindu law was mainly concerned with personal matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) and was interpreted according to century-old texts based on the *Code of Manu*. Muslim personal law was rooted in the Koran; but there was also a Muslim criminal code which, under the Mughals, had been applied to both Muslims and Hindus. Under Warren Hastings, some District Courts – Com-

This early 19th-Century model shows a local court, or "kutcherry," in session. This was a traditional Indian institution which the British used to maintain law and order. Here a Company official presides as judge while the accused (kneeling) pleads his case.

pany institutions – were set up in order to retain the continuity of the Indian systems; they were presided over by British judge-magistrates who relied entirely on Indian law officers for interpretation of the questions at hand. These courts were subject in authority to a Supreme Court, set up first in Calcutta in 1773 (and later in Madras and Bombay), which was meant "to form a strong and solid security for the natives against wrongs and oppressions of British subjects resident in Bengal," and which administered a dual system of British law for the British and customary law based on custom for their Indian subjects.

Macaulay described the functioning of the Supreme Court as a reign of terror: ". . . even that which was endured was less horrible than that which was anticipated. No man knew what was next to be expected from this strange tribunal . . . it consisted of judges not one of whom spoke the language, or was familiar with the usages, of the millions over whom it claimed boundless authority. Its records were kept in unknown characters; its sentences were pronounced in unknown sounds." The confusion was heightened when British judges began to interpret translations of the ancient texts used as reference for customary law. The texts were condemned by James Mill as "a disorderly compilation of loose, vague, stupid or unintelligible quotations and maxims: selected arbitrarily from books of law, books of devotion, and books of poetry; attended with a commentary which only adds to the absurdity and darkness."

Furthermore, the Supreme Court had a tendency to claim absolute jurisdiction. At least one administrator, John "Boy" Malcolm, who was appointed Governor of Bombay in 1827, saw the dangers inherent in this move. "Boy" – his nickname was a comment on both the fact that he was commissioned in the Company's army at 13 and on his irrepressible high spirits – was prepared to stake his reputation in a challenge to the Court's absolutism. In his province there was a wealthy minor, a Maratha chief, who, in accordance with his father's will, lived under the guardianship of his father-in-law. But the boy had an uncle who claimed that his nephew had been abducted from him and that he should have sole control over the young chief – and, of course, over his wealth. The uncle appealed to the Supreme Court which accepted without inquiry the man's inflated and untrue tale of abduction. A writ of *habeas corpus* was issued and the boy and his father-in-law were hauled to Bombay and detained there for months at the will of the Court. Malcolm insisted that the Court had no authority to issue a writ or to interfere in a such a matter at all, since it was meant to deal only with questions involving European servants of the Company. He viewed the action as a threat to the delicate British-Maratha relationship. "I shall not remain a week to have the government over which I preside trampled upon nor the empire to the prosperity of which the efforts of my life have been devoted beaten down, not by honest fellows with glittering sabres, but quibbling quill-driving lawyers . . ." he wrote. Eventually, his objections were upheld by the Court of Directors, but it was a bitter and lonely battle.

In the District Courts – greatly increased in number by Lord Cornwallis – the "quill-driving lawyers" were successful in correcting many injustices. Cornwallis had modified the Muslim criminal code, and with certain barbarous aspects pruned, it became more humane than that of England. It was applied in areas where the old code had been used; customary Hindu law was applied where the custom was known; and British law was applied only in those areas where the Indian legal systems had ceased to be in existence.

But it was still all very unsatisfactory: because of the vast size of a district, and often the inaccessibility of separate areas, and the lack of qualified law officers, court sessions were too often infrequent; delays sometimes caused great personal suffering to those with serious grievances; there were seemingly unavoidable miscarriages of justice – and adding to the sheer difficulty of attendance, there were language barriers, questions of procedure, and the "absurdity and darkness" of the ancient texts.

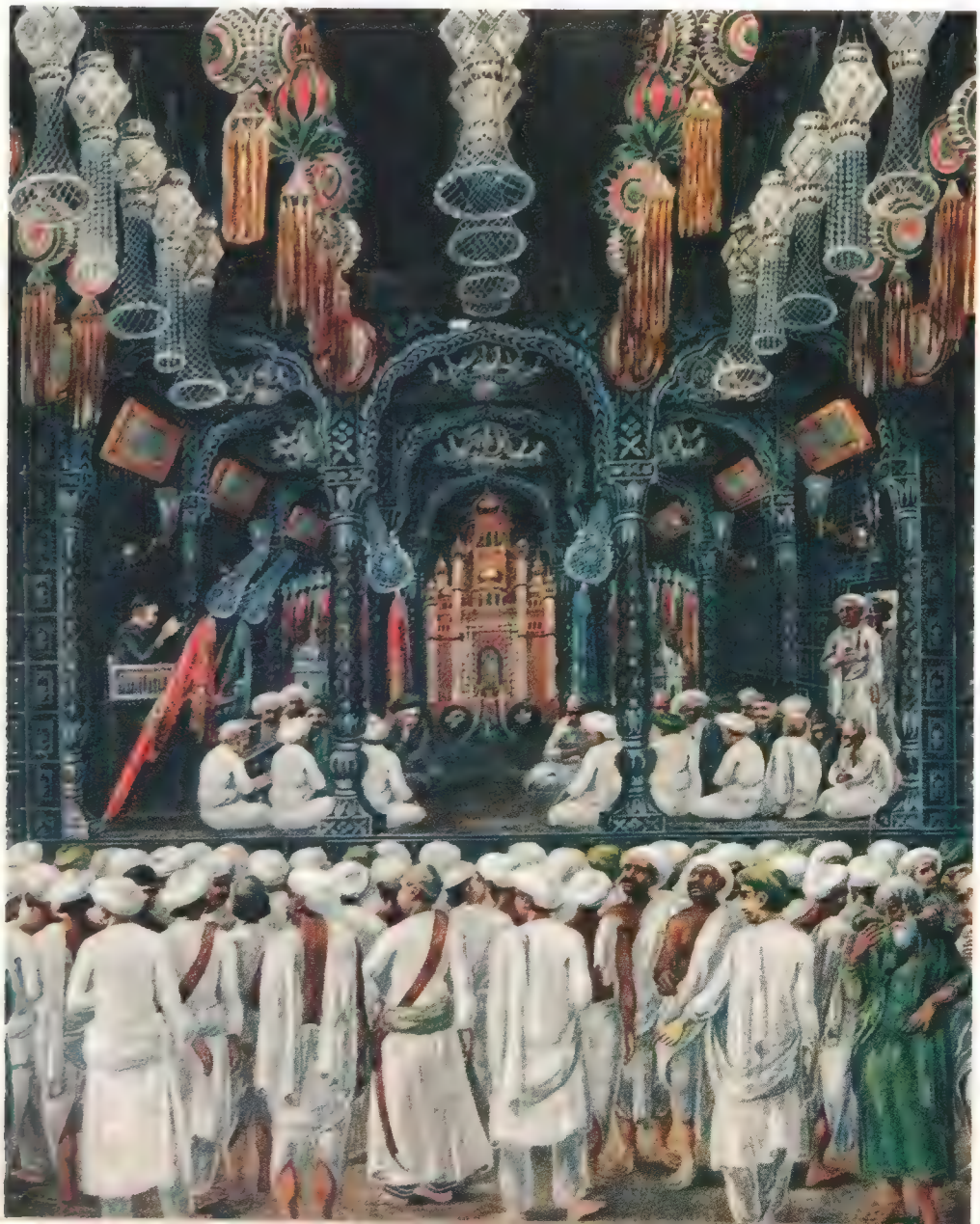
In the District Courts, British judges did not pronounce on the interpretation of texts (and they were careful not to debate points touching on religion), but they presided: and the weight of their final decisions, inevitably influenced by British precedents, could not avoid lessening to some degree the authority of old scriptures, thereby increasing Indian feelings of insecurity.

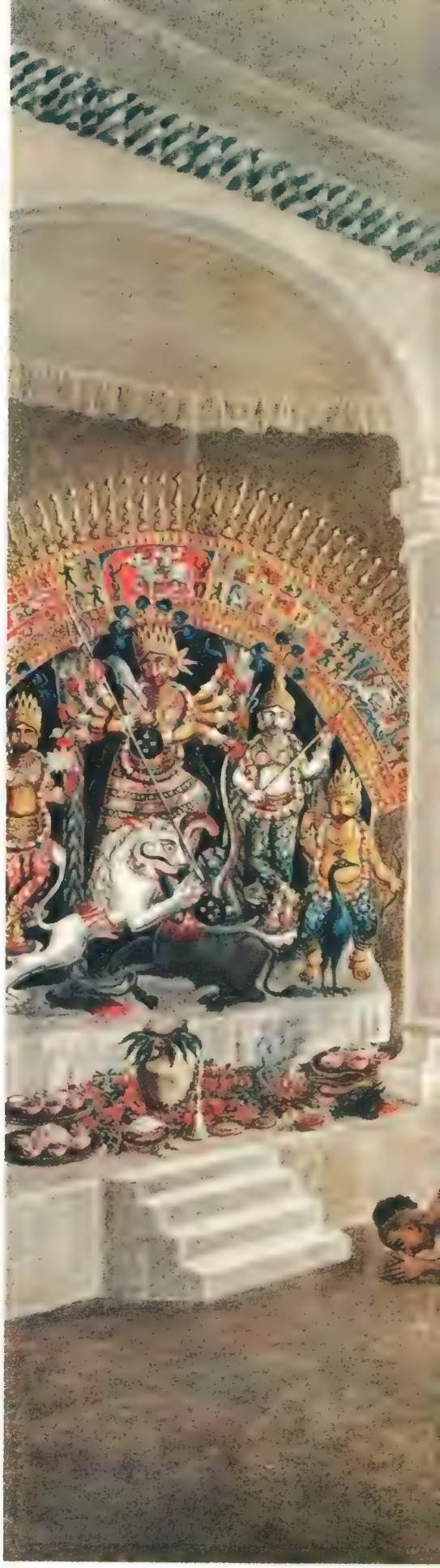
The courts were too remote and too expensive to have an immediate impact on the Indian masses, and so the subdued chaos in which they existed was allowed to drift – for want of a solution – until Macaulay's Law Commission had formulated a uniform legal code. Incredibly, it took the Commission 30 years to evolve its system of "universal principles." The chaotic procedures that grew up under Warren Hastings and Lord Cornwallis in the late 18th Century remained in practice until 1861. Of all Bentinck's important reforms, the uniform legal code thus took the longest to make its full effects felt.

An old troubadour of the Vaisya caste plucks a "vina." Troubadours were employed in Rajahs' palaces and, like their medieval European counterparts, often sang of courtly love.

INDIA'S "GRAND ABOMINATION"

To many 19th-Century British Christians, the religions of India seemed "one grand abomination," at best perverse, at worst horrific. Hinduism, with its gory sacrifices to innumerable deities, appalled them. The Muslim faith with its worship of one God, Allah, and its reverence for long-dead saints, seemed misguided rather than abominable. Missionaries, striving for converts from both religions, attacked traditional Hindu and Muslim practices, whether they were joyful marriage ceremonies or grisly death-by-fire rituals, both of which are shown in these Indian water-colours commissioned for sale in England.





Under lanterns, Muslim mourners listen to a holy man (in pulpit) reading an account of the martyrdom of the prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husain, during the annual festival in the saint's memory.

Hindu villagers sacrifice goats at a shrine to the fertility deity Durga and implore her aid in producing rich harvests with offerings of flowers and food.

Styles of Marriage

Though both Hindu and Muslim marriages were arranged by parents, in other respects the marriage customs of the two religions were worlds apart.

In Hindu society women were considered inferior beings and the bride's father was expected to pay a handsome dowry to be rid of his worthless daughter.

A Muslim father, however, had to pay for his daughter-in-law and would go to great pains to select the daughter of a worthwhile family for his son.

During the Hindu ceremony, held under a bamboo awning, the couple squatted side by side and after the exchange of gifts the groom accepted the bride by grasping her hand and exclaiming: "I am the words, thou the melody; I am the seed, thou the bearer."

A Muslim wedding had none of this calm intimacy. After the bridegroom's lavish and noisy procession to the bride's house, designed to show off his wealth and prestige, a Muslim bride might find herself one of several wives whiling away long hours in the women's quarters.

A wealthy Muslim bridegroom, resplendent in golden robes and seated on a white charger rides in procession to his bride's house, preceded by musicians and men bearing sweetmeats.

Women of a Muslim household amuse themselves during the rainy season with a swing slung from the roof of their quarters.

At a Hindu wedding the bridegroom often eclipsed his heavily veiled bride with an exotic head-dress and luxurious clothes.

A Terrible Death in the Flames

The custom that most revolted the British public was the Hindu practice of suttee – or burning widows on the funeral-pyres of their husbands – which contrasted vividly with the more familiar burial ceremonies of the Muslims.

Artists often depicted Hindu widows dressed in fine saris and jewellery going bravely and calmly to their death. In reality, the women were frequently stupefied with drugs or were even pushed into the flames by men standing round the pyres with bamboo poles. Pyres were also built in deep pits to rule out the possibility of escape altogether.

Between 1815 and 1828 there were over 5,000 recorded cases of suttee in Bengal. The Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, outlawed the savage practice in 1829, but incredibly there is a case of a widow consigning herself to the flames as recently as 1946.

At a Muslim burial, gravediggers lower a shroud-covered corpse, taken from the string-bed (foreground), into a grave while family mourners and the cemetery caretaker look on.

When a Hindu widow prepared for suttee, Hindus believed she bestowed eternal bliss on anyone she looked at and that by her suicide she would earn 35 million years bliss for herself and her husband.

III. The Seeds of Rebellion

Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General, enters Cawnpore, 1852. He rode roughshod over Indian feelings and left the country seething with discontent.

Bentinck left India in 1835: and with him went the rush to reform. For a decade after there was rest; and it was possible to stand back and measure the extraordinary change the British adventure had brought to Indian life.

The material nature of the change was felt most acutely in trade and industry. Until 1813, the East India Company had held a trading monopoly in British India. This guaranteed a certain degree of stability. But the Charter Act of 1813 threw India open to private British enterprise. The result was a sharp decline in Indian industry which depended largely on the export of its textiles.

The extent of this decline is disputed, but according to one extreme view, by the Communist Indian historian Rumesh Dutt, in *The Economic History of India*, "the East India Company and the British Parliament . . . discouraged Indian manufacturers in the early years of British rule in order to encourage the rising manufactures of England. Their fixed policy . . . was to make India subservient to the industries of Great Britain, and to make the Indian people grow raw produce only, in order to supply material for the loom and manufactories of Great Britain. This policy was pursued with unwavering resolution and fatal success; orders were sent out, to force Indian artisans to work in the Company's factories; commercial residents were legally vested with extensive powers over villages and communities of Indian weavers; prohibitive tariffs excluded Indian silk and cotton goods from England; English goods were admitted into India free of duty or on a payment of a nominal duty."

The goods of the English Industrial Revolution had come to India: but the Revolution had stayed at home. By the time the British government had recognized the natural dangers in the situation, it was too late. Evidence given before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1840 indicated the scale of the decline: "The only cotton manufactures which stand their ground in India are the very coarse kinds, and the English cotton manufactures are generally consumed by all above the very poorest throughout India. . . . Dacca, which was the Manchester of India, has fallen off from a very flourishing town to a very poor and small one; the distress there has been very great indeed."

Many Indians might have looked to the land for an alternative living, but there, too, the old patterns had disappeared. Because of the continual change of ownership and the competition in growing exotic commercial crops, more land was under cultivation, but the peasant derived no benefit from it. The cultivation of the commercial crops – opium above all, as well as indigo, jute, and (later) tea – was almost exclusively under the control of Europeans, and the cultivation of indigenous staple crops such as rice and wheat was run by the

new absentee landlords who had emerged with the introduction of the new *zamindari* system (the situation was somewhat better in areas in which the Munro *ryotwari* system operated.) For the peasants and the new wandering force of surplus labour, the land not only held no financial reward – it represented a loss of an emotional and spiritual heritage.

Socially, a new Indian middle class had emerged: men who had seized the opportunities left open by the Company's early monopoly restrictions against private enterprise. Some had grown rich by trading with the merchants of continental Europe and America; some by trading in the Indian interior, an area made inaccessible to private British merchants by Company prohibitions; others by turning to the land and the speculation afforded by the Cornwallis reforms. This new middle class was already a formidable force by the 1830s. They were quick to see that the technological innovations of the British – in communications and transport – were of great future advantage to India, and they actively encouraged progress; from them Bentinck drew his recruits for a new-style administration; they were the first to take hold of the opportunities for Western education and to supply India with a new force of doctors and teachers; and they regenerated the flagging Indian cultural life.

The rise of the new middle class coincided with the arrival in India of the Marquess of Dalhousie, which in 1848 put an abrupt end to the period of tranquillity that had followed Lord William Bentinck's departure.

The new Governor-General was the complete Western reformer, utterly convinced of the superiority of the West in all things. Dalhousie precipitated a new process of innovation at a time when the people of India had only just begun to gauge the consequences of the reforms of his predecessors. He began the Indian railway system; he introduced the telegraph; he pushed the British reforms in education to their maximum limit. But his career was capped by a dazzling display of the old imperialism: he annexed eight states in as many years, including the Punjab. Incapable of believing that Hindus could administer their own states, he put into effect the "doctrine of lapse" which allowed the British to take over states from Hindu princes who had no natural heirs, thus refusing to recognize the Hindu custom of adoption.

The Indian upper classes and the new middle class viewed this situation with growing alarm. They had been slow to grasp the essentially dynamic quality of British rule; it took time to see that the Bentinck regime had gradually undermined some of the most fundamental of Indian traditions: but now they understood immediately that Dalhousie was intent on cutting out of India the last vestiges of Indian independence.

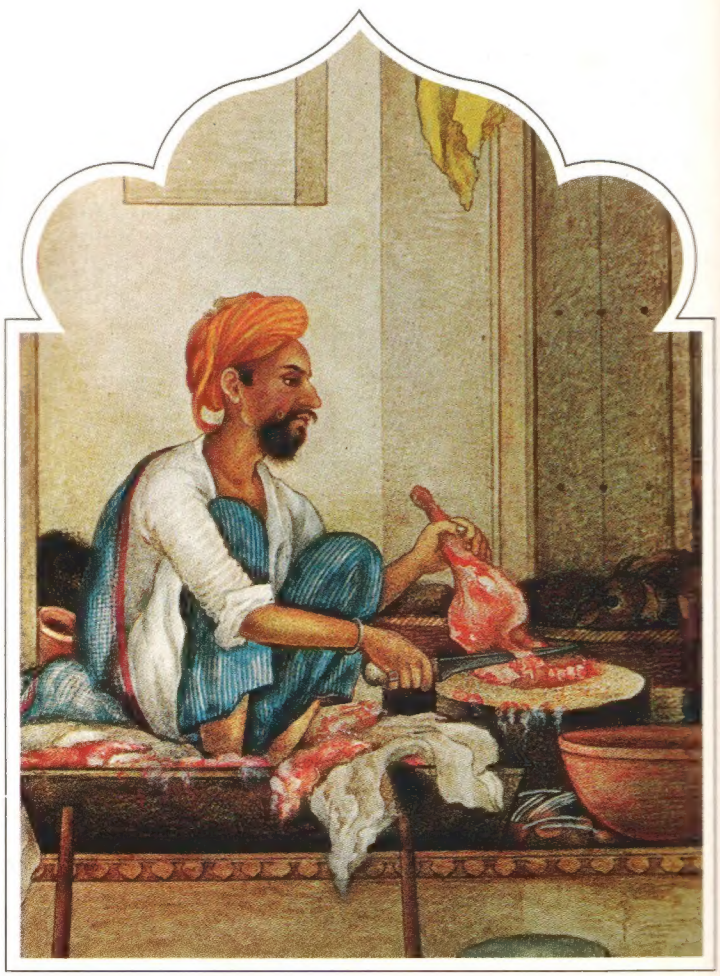
Conservatives and traditionalists – and those who would be later called "Nationalists" – began to see the British-Indian relationship in a different light. It had always looked absurd: the great mass of India held by a few pockets of a doll-like British society which was an arrogant reconstruction of England, where a handful of civil servants and a few thousand soldiers and their families were claustrophobically bound together by anachronistic customs and imported prejudices, and where, as one English visitor to Calcutta noted, every Briton prided himself "on being outrageously a John Bull." Now these isolated groups of "little Englands" began to look monstrous: greedy, racist, and utterly ruthless. It was natural that the innovations and inventions of such people should be considered evil. The telegraph, the railways, the roads were a means of destroying ancient communal life; technological advances in factories were a threat to caste; changes of occupation – necessary for survival – often meant the eternally damning loss of caste; above all, education in Western principles was considered to be a deliberate corruption of the minds of the young, an attempt to sow seeds of doubt, and contempt for traditional authority, in the hearts of the country's future leaders.

Everywhere an Indian looked he could see rents in the social, economic and political fabric of his life. It was clear that the social reforms introduced by the British and carried out with complete disregard for Indian feeling, had been made not for the future improvement of the Indian's welfare, but because Indian customs offended British morality; it was equally clear that the economic reforms had been designed to make the Englishman richer and the Indian poorer. Territory was grabbed, apparently for no other reason but to control it; estates were seized (Dalhousie confiscated about 20,000 in the Deccan alone) in order to break Indian power.

This heightened awareness of a political dilemma was the result of a dawning realization by Indians in Bengal that the old order was slipping inexorably away. A sense of the necessity for change was shared equally by sections of the conservative upper classes who feared extinction, and the new middle class whose identity had not yet been defined by political action.

Emerging prophets of nationalism found many eager and fervent supporters.

The first important figures were modernizers: Henry Derozio and Ram



A Muslim butcher trims a cut of goat for a Hindu customer. Although some Hindus eat meat they shun the taking of life and leave slaughtering and the sale of meat to Muslims.

Ram Mohan Roy, a controversial Hindu reformer who roundly condemned pantheism, suttee and caste, believed firmly in India's ability to govern herself.

Mohun Roy. Derozio was a Portuguese-Indian who had been brought up a Christian. At the age of 17, he joined the Hindu College as a teacher and became an Assistant Headmaster when he was 19. He was forced to resign two years later, and died soon afterwards, but in those five years he exercised an enormous influence over his middle-class pupils. He taught them the radical, sceptical, scientific thought of the West and his group of young followers, known as "Young Bengal," grew up free-thinking and almost totally Western in outlook, attacking everything in Hinduism that struck them as irrational. It was a staggering legacy to have been left by a man who died at the age of 21.

Ram Mohun Roy also favoured Westernization – but not at a cost to Hinduism. A brilliant and prolific writer in Persian, English and Bengali, he believed that India could and should benefit greatly from Western liberal ideals and Western technology, but he saw no reason why India should renounce her true nature for Western social ideology. He was primarily concerned with reforming Hinduism: he wanted to restore its purity, to break with the elaborate, ritualistic worship of many gods and to return instead to the worship of the "Formless True God" of the ancient Hindu texts. This, he hoped, would give back to the Hindu his sense of identity and pride.

Roy's utter rejection of prophets – including Christ – drew down the anger of Muslims and Christians as well as Hindus. He took the lead in political action, protesting, for instance, at the law that banned Indians from sitting as jurors in English law courts, even when their own countrymen were on trial. His brilliance was recognized in Europe when he visited France and England in the three years before his death in Bristol in 1833.

Neither Derozio nor Roy had much appeal for the conservative classes who sought an immediate – and anti-Western – solution (although the ideas of both became very important later on in the common fight to get the British out of India). Derozio's ideas seemed too radical, long-ranging and impractical; Ram Mohun's tightrope ideology offended the traditionalists, since it required drastic reinterpretation of Hindu scripture.

Although there was no single ideology that commanded widespread attention, organized groups with distinctly nationalist feelings began to appear regularly on the Bengal political scene. The most important was the British Indian Association, formed in 1851 in order to protest against discrimination in law and to establish claims when the East India Company's Charter became due for renewal in 1853. Strictly an upper-class organization, it mainly strove for the right to commercial equality and the readmittance of the Indian upper classes into the administration of the country. But on a broader scale, the Association spoke for India as a whole: "The British Government," a speaker told the Bombay branch in 1852, "professes to educate the Natives to an equality with Europeans, an object worthy of the age and of Britain. But if Englishmen after educating the Natives to be their equals continue to treat them as their inferiors – if they deny the stimulus of honourable ambition. . . . Are they not in effect undoing all they have done, unteaching the Native all that he has been taught, and pursuing a suicidal policy, which will inevitably array all the talent, honour and intelligence of the country ultimately in irreconcilable hostility to the ruling power?"

It was indeed a suicidal policy.

The ideas of the new Indian political organizations – whose feelings represented an embryonic nationalism, though without a formulated ideology – generally reflected the amorphous sense of discontent, puzzlement and despair of the Indian masses. Support was widespread; and it included the intellectual youth of India who, disillusioned and frustrated by British discrimination and obstinacy, increasingly turned away from their former pro-Western ideals towards a fiercely proud sense of identity as Indians (or rather, as Hindus: Muslims remained comparatively aloof and disinterested in the Westernization trauma.)

By the mid-1850s, India was riven with tensions and geared for change: but a change for what? What would come after? What would be lost? Indians felt desperately insecure. It was an explosive situation in which only the smallest spark was needed to ignite a mutual flame of hostility. It was to be sparked in 1857.

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